



**SUCTION DREDGING
NOT PERMITTED
ON TRIBUTARIES
TO THE SALMON RIVER**

United States
Department of Agriculture
Forest Service

Salmon-Challis National Forest
1206 South Challis Street
Salmon, ID 83467

You may have heard recently that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has completed a general permit that provides for suction dredging in the State of Idaho. That is **not** the case for most waters on the Salmon-Challis National Forest.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the State of Idaho issue suction dredging permits with attachments indicating rivers and streams where dredges are permitted. The Salmon River and its tributaries within the Salmon-Challis National Forest are **CLOSED** to these permits.

Since 1993 the Chinook salmon, steelhead trout and bull trout have been listed as threatened and the sockeye salmon has been listed as endangered. Nearly all of the SCNF is occupied by, and designated as critical habitat for, one or more of these species.

Since the 1990s, EPA has maintained that a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) Permit is required for suction dredging (this includes small dredges, defined as having intake nozzle diameters of 5 inches or less, and with equipment rated at 15 horsepower or less). The NPDES permit sets conditions on the discharge - or release - of pollutants from these operations into waters of the United States. While EPA has issued a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) General Permit for small suction dredges used in Idaho placer mining operations, most streams on the SCNF will be ineligible for this General Permit, because it is not intended cover operations in critical fish habitat.

The Central Idaho Wilderness Act of 1980 withdrew the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness area from mineral location and prohibits all forms of placer mining in the Middle Fork Salmon River and its tributaries in their entirety. Tributaries to the Middle Fork Salmon where placer mining is prohibited include Loon Creek, Marsh Creek, Elk Creek, Bear Valley Creek, and Rapid River.

The EPA requires the permit because Section 301(a) of the Clean Water Act (CWA) prohibits most point source discharges of pollutants to waters of the U.S. unless they are authorized by a National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit. The EPA has defined suction dredging a point source discharge.

In order for the Forest Service to approve a Plan of Operation, it must demonstrate compliance with the regulations of other agencies such as the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Marine Fisheries Service, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Given the restrictions on EPA's General Permit for small-scale suction dredging in Idaho and the lack of a process to obtain an individual NPDES permit, it is unlikely that an operator would be able to comply with applicable EPA permitting regulations.

Additionally, most streams and rivers on the Forest provide critical habitat and are occupied by one or more of the aforementioned threatened and endangered fish species, the in-stream work window for activities such as suction dredging is very narrow (as little as two weeks or less per summer).

Other forms of placer mining are still allowed on the Forest but most require an approved Plan of Operation.

Panning - The Forest does not have a designated recreational gold panning area. Incidental recreational panning does occur but it is an activity that the Forest Service does not formally authorize. Generally,

when the operation involves only short-term panning and no surface disturbance is involved, this is acceptable. Digging in a stream bank for material to pan is considered surface disturbance.

Sluice box or trommel operations excavate a portion of a stream bank and utilize the water from the stream to rinse the materials in the sluice box, leaving the gold. Sluice box or trommel operations that involve operation in or near stream banks will normally require a Plan of Operations. The standard Forest advice is that an operator should submit their plan for USFS review as early as possible during the operating season prior to their desired start up.

In general, if you are going to propose a sluice, trommel or other placer operation then you need to have a pre-approved water right that you can demonstrate to the Forest Service. For operations of limited water quantity and duration (one year or less), it is generally possible to obtain a temporary water right through the Idaho Department of Water resources.

If you have any questions about whether any of your proposed mining activities require a Notice of Intent or Plan of Operation, you should contact one of the following program specialists for further information:

North Fork, Salmon-Cobalt, or Leadore Ranger Districts	Challis-Yankee Fork, Middle Fork, or Lost River Ranger Districts
Russ Bjorklund, 208-756-5283	Piper Goessel, 208-879-4158
Julie Hopkins, 208-756-5279	Amanda Kriwox, 208-879-4153